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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 000489

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MONTENEGRIN INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM: VOTE BUYING
ALLEGED, BLOCS SOLIDIFY

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY

Ref: Belgrade 427

11. (SBU) Summary: A video purportedly showing DPS (pro-Independence) activists attempting to buy the vote of a pro-Union voter received wide coverage, in Montenegro and Serbia, on March 24. Both blocs have accused the other of being behind the video. The parties have formalized their blocs, a prerequisite to splitting Euros 2 million in state funding for the campaign. After a slow and discouraging start, more Serbian media outlets (including Radio-Television Serbia) have signed the voluntary media code of conduct for the referendum. The USG-supported local NGO CDT has called on parties to reduce the possibility for a tense campaign. Ambassador Polt met EU Envoy Lajcak March 24 (septel). End summary.

Votes, Lies, and Videotape

12. (U) On March 23 and 24, Montenegrin and Serbian media extensively covered a secretly recorded ten-minute film, purportedly showing three alleged members of the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) offering to pay the Euros 1600 electricity bill of a citizen of Golubovci, near Podgorica, in exchange for a promise that he would vote for independence. The DPS has claimed the film was fabricated by a recently dismissed pro-Union National Security Agency (secret service) officer, with past ties to paramilitary organizations and the Serbian secret service. He and the two alleged DPS representatives have been released from detention pending trial. The pro-Union bloc claims the footage is authentic. Some of those filmed claim they were filmed illegally. The State Prosecutor has announced an investigation, consistent with her earlier statements to pursue actively such allegations (ref).

13. (SBU) Comment: As the NGO Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) observed March 23, allegations of vote buying are common in Montenegrin elections, but rarely lead to prosecutions, either for violations of the election laws as alleged, or for baseless accusations. (CDT's activities are supported by USAID through a grant to NDI.) The tape may be authentic, but the amount offered for one vote -- sixty percent of per capita GDP (2638 Euros) -- is suspiciously high. SaM Foreign Minister Vuk Draskovic is widely quoted in local media on March 27 as stating that he believes the film was staged. The surreptitious nature of the filming will probably make the tape unusable in court as evidence of vote buying and, as alleged by some participants, may itself be a crime. But while the tape temporarily fed tensions, attention has already started to drift away. End comment.

Blocs Stacked Up

14. (U) To be eligible to split Euros 2 million in state funding for the referendum campaign, the political parties must organize formally into blocs. The pro-Union bloc was formalized March 20, and includes four pro-Union parties: Socialist People's Party (SNP), People's Party (NS), Serbian People's Party (SNS) and Democratic Serbian Party (DSS). Also joining were: Socialist Party of Yugoslavia (formerly headed by Slobodan Milosevic); Serbian Radical Party (Vojislav Seselj); Communists of Montenegro; Movement for European Joint State of SaM; Council of People's Clans; Association of Veterans of WWII; Association of Warriors of the Wars of the 1990s; Movement for the Preservation of Serbs; and others.

15. (U) The pro-Independence parties formalized their bloc on March 23. It will include ten parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties: Democratic Party of Socialists, Social Democratic Party, Civic Party, Liberal Party, Democratic Union of Albanians, National Unity, Civic Forum, Bosniak Party, Croatian Civic Initiative, Democratic Community of Muslims/Bosniaks and the Independence Movement. Two ethnic Albanian parties that have not signed the agreement, Party of Democratic Prosperity and Democratic Alliance in Montenegro, stated that it will not affect their support to independence.

Media Code of Conduct

16. (U) Almost all media in Montenegro have pledged to observe the voluntary code of conduct ("codex") for

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covering the referendum. Twenty-one Serbian media outlets (newspapers, TV, radio) are widely available in Montenegro, and on March 10 were invited to sign the codex. Initially, only four did so, and no major outlets signed. Quiet pressure led by the OSCE, with support from the USG and the EU's Envoy Ambassador Lajcak, increased the signatures to eight by March 27, including Radio-Television Serbia (RTS), the largest of the Serbian media available in Montenegro.

NGOs Looking to Reduce Tensions

17. (U) The local NGO, Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), appealed on March 23 and 24 for both blocs to take steps to reduce tensions and avoid divisions among the citizenry. It cautioned the pro-Union bloc on its repeated "warnings" of tensions, and referring to the vote as a "war referendum." It also sharply and at length rejected pro-Independence talk of a "grey zone" (a majority for independence that falls short of the legal requirement of 55 percent of votes cast), saying that all aspects of the referendum law should be respected. The CDT reminded the public of its phone line for complaints. The CDT is supported by the USG through a grant to NDI.

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